

DOCTORAL THESIS

MEANINGLÊS: John Havelda's Multilingual Poetry and Language-Based Art

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**MEANINGLÊS: John Havelda's Multilingual Poetry and
Language-Based Art**

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements

for the degree of PhD

Department of English and Creative Writing

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Abstract

This PhD by publication focuses on over fifteen years of my cultural production, including poetry, translation, critical essays, and work produced in the context of the visual arts. Ranging from my earliest published work in *mor* (1997) to my most recent writing projects such as *pullllllllllllllllllllllllllllllll: Poesia Contemporânea do Canadá* (2010) and the “:”s, published in *Open Letter* (2012). I have consistently produced work in dialogue with the international context of linguistically innovative writing. The fourteen texts collected here provide clear examples of my approach to practice-led research. Accompanying this portfolio, I have produced a critical essay which reflects on the work. This essay employs a modular rather than a standard hypotactic structure to trace the influences on and the connections among the disparate group of texts which make up my portfolio. A crucial element in my work is the notion—expressed by various proponents of Language Writing and other key influences—that literary production and reception are political as well as aesthetic activities. The critical essay thus contextualizes my work in relation to the politicized experimentalism of North American and European poetics, and clarifies how my writing has consistently challenged the social authority of standard usage in grammar and syntax, as well as socially “normal” reading practices.

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1. *mor*. Porto: Macedonia Livros, 1997. Print.
2. John Havelde and João Nunes. *Chain* 9 (2002): 109-111. Print.
3. *dANDelion*. Vol. 29, n. 2 (2003): 83-90. Print.
4. John Havelde and Fred Wah. *Know Your Place* (exhibition catalogue) Porto: ImagoLucis Fotogaleria, 2005. Print.
5. *Unparalled Candour*. Porto: de Corrida Edições, 2005. Print.
6. John Havelde and Fred Wah. *Know Your Place* Porto: de Corrida Edições, 2007. Print.
7. *Echo and Narcissus*. Porto: de Corrida Edições, 2007. Print.
8. *Combine*. Porto: de Corrida Edições, 2007. Print.
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13. “How Much Is That Big Sign in the Window?: Ron Terada’s Translations”
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Without the patient and perspicacious supervision of Peter Jaeger, this essay would never have been written. For his guidance and his example as an artist, I am deeply grateful.

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A standard academic essay may not necessarily be the best way to discuss poetry: sometimes the most appropriate response to a poem is another poem. Besides, the essay rarely does justice to its etymology. Michel de Montaigne's *Essays* (1580) are "attempts" or "trials"—shots at it. They are written in a variety of styles and embrace an astonishing breadth of subjects, from the education of children to cannibalism. Montaigne essentially set out to write essays to try and discover what he thought and who he might be. I rarely sense that risk and catholicism in contemporary versions of the form, which seem too often carefully hedged and manicured defensive pronouncements.

•

In contrast, Charles Bernstein's exhilarating essays often challenge academic propriety. Both "Frame Lock" and "The Practice of Poetics," for example, offer eloquent and witty critiques of "scholarly decorum." In the former, Bernstein states:

Frame lock is a term I base on Erving Goffman's *Frame Analysis*. As applied to prose, it can generally be characterized as an insistence on a univocal surface, minimal shifts of mood either within paragraphs or between paragraphs, exclusion of extraneous or contradictory material, and tone restricted to the narrow affective envelope of sobriety, neutrality, objectivity, authoritativeness, or deanimated abstraction. In frame-locked prose, the order of sentences and paragraphs is hypotactic, based on a clear subordination of elements to an overriding argument that is made in a narrative or expository or linear fashion. In what might be called the rule of the necessity of

paraphrase, the argument must be separable from its expression, so that a defined message can be extracted from the text. (92)

He goes on to argue that “[f]rame-locked prose seems to deny its questions, its contradictions, its exhilarations, its comedy, its groping” (98). The divagations presented here seek to question the work I have produced. They are *un essai* that does not demand of the text that it produce a defined message, but that it grope toward new possibilities.

•

Bernstein is of course one of the most vocal and widely-cited poets working within the tradition of what has come to be known as “Language Writing.” This discourse provides a key point of influence for much of my writing. Whilst it is true to say that this area of poetry and poetics is difficult to characterize due to the wide variety of approaches and forms employed by its various practitioners, this “school” shares a broad interest in the politics of reading and literary reception, as well as in the use of appropriated and found texts and alternative forms of translation. Along with Bernstein, the work of Steve McCaffery is especially relevant to my own practice; McCaffery’s association with the journal *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* and with this school’s principal poets and critics has been well documented. During the heyday of Language Writing’s initial intervention into the North American poetry world, McCaffery employed the term “Language Writing” to describe texts by writers who held an interest in “the question of reference, a question which they see as having its social and political as well as aesthetic consequences” (“Nothing” 110). More recently, Language Writing has gained an increasingly visible and arguably more

respected presence in the academy, as well as in various international and local poetry contexts. However, that increased cultural visibility has not significantly altered the social and political interests of McCaffery and other writers working in the field. Although I was not involved in Language Writing from its inception, my work over the last twenty years has most often circulated in small presses and journals associated with the school, such as *Chain*, *West Coast Line*, and *Open Letter*. For this reason, the discourse of Language Writing—in its historical and current manifestation—remains a foundational literary and cultural context for my work.

•

I have read locally in Coimbra with a group of poets based in the workshop and journal *Oficina da Poesia*, and in Porto with the group that established the reading series *Quintas de Leitura*, but the latter's primary focus on traditional free verse lyric poetry and surrealism was incompatible with my poetics. Since 1992 the tri-annual poetry festival *Encontros Internacionais de Poetas* at the University of Coimbra has opened up my work to an international audience, and I have found a more engaged readership in contexts sympathetic to Language Writing and linguistically innovative poetry. Along with publishing work in the journals mentioned above, I have read at Mark Wallace's Ruthless Grip series in Washington D.C., the Red Flannel Reading Series sponsored by the Poetry/Rare Books Collection of the University of Buffalo, New York, Alan Halsey and Geraldine Monk's Sheffield Poetry International, Jeff Hilson's Xing the Line series in London, the Atwater Poetry Project in Montreal, the

Kootenay School of Writing in Vancouver, and Thin Air, the Winnipeg International Writers' Festival, where my visual work was also exhibited.

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Peter Jaeger discusses Jeff Derksen's poem "But Could I Make a Living from It?" to highlight and explore its modular structure, noting that it does not progress in a linear or hypotactic fashion, but incorporates a form analogous to space frames, i.e. repeated architectural structures used to support long-span roofs (30). It is this kind of modular form I am using here to shape my discussion.

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Contemporary architects need to wrestle with the problem of designing domestic spaces that enable life to flourish. Le Corbusier's "streets in the sky" have meant that many urban dwellers in Europe, if not globally, are obliged to live in relative isolation, inhabiting anachronistic boxes in the air. Much of contemporary poetry, indeed writing in general—I am thinking here of what Charles Bernstein refers to as "official verse culture" ("Academy" 246)—suffers from an analogous condition, drawing as it does on a seriously limited and repetitive lexicon that has little in common with a world in dizzying flux, in which people are exposed to all manner of discourses, dialects and languages. Writing that plugs its ears and blinkers its eyes to this plethora of acoustic and visual excitement risks offering merely the linguistic equivalent of a studio apartment with no balcony on the tenth floor of a concrete block, complete with a view of the airshaft.

•

Found Texts

Under the sign of Duchamp, I have always been drawn to found texts, or more specifically found texts which seek to limit or even censor language. As immigrants to England, my parents relied on a phrase book called *Angol Velemjáró: Társalgási Gyakorlatok, Nyelvtan és Szótár/ English Guide for Hungarians* (1957). In my poem “That Is Sensible Mrs. Gaspar” from *mor* (1997), I try to expose the political implications of such linguistic prescriptions. An epistolary manual published during the Salazar dictatorship, *Como se escreve uma carta [How to Write a Letter]* (1948), in which, for example, an obsequious letter from an employee to thank his employer for a pay rise is celebrated as good manners, was the germ for *Unparalleled Candour* (2005). My poem “Where Mr. Reagan Learnt His Craft” (2003) is a collage of fragments from *Commercial Mania*, a collection of 1950s and 1960s commercials.

•

We often use the expression ‘as if’ to discuss our works. It is ‘as if’ a carved object is an ashtray, ‘as if’ it is a tire or whatever, but the objects themselves are not there. A chair is made for sitting, but you cannot sit on our chairs; they would immediately break.

So what does that mean? It means only the aspect of looking at the chair remains for the viewer, and the object is removed from its slavery to be used as a chair. People always reference the idea of the Readymade here, but our works are in a way the complete opposite of

the Readymade—we have to make them, we have to make them ready!
 (Fischli qtd. in Maerke n.p.)

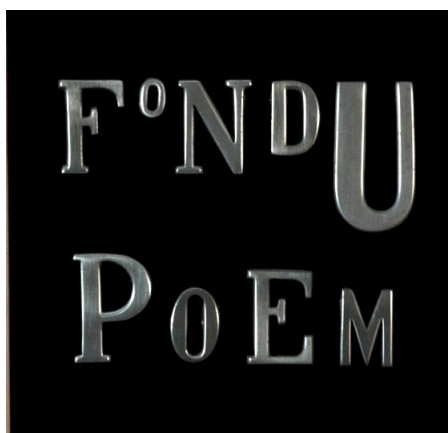


Fig. 1. John Havelde, *Fondu Poem*, 2005, aluminium and enamel paint on wood, 25 x 25 cm.

Fondu Poem (fig. 1), one of the ongoing series *Like Meaning off a Duck's Back* (2003-), plays off a similar relation to found poetry. As Fischli and Weiss' polyurethane objects seem to reference readymades but in fact are quite the opposite, so this piece implies an identity as found poetry, although the comic misspelling skews that misconception, and the piece is not found at all but laboriously manufactured.

⋮

Multilingualism

My work is generated by a poetics of nomadism: it is often multivocal and multilingual. I am fortunate to have lived in English, Portuguese, Hungarian and French. Much of my recent visual work takes this a step further by focusing on the paragram, or words within words, and languages within other languages (fig. 2).

Steve McCaffery describes the paragram in his essay “*The Martyrology as Paragram*,” as “a displacement from ... the *literal* to the *letteral* that opens up writing to the productional processes inherent in the words themselves” (61). Once the paragram as an inevitable force in language is recognized, “literal” meanings and “common sense” readings start to look very suspicious.

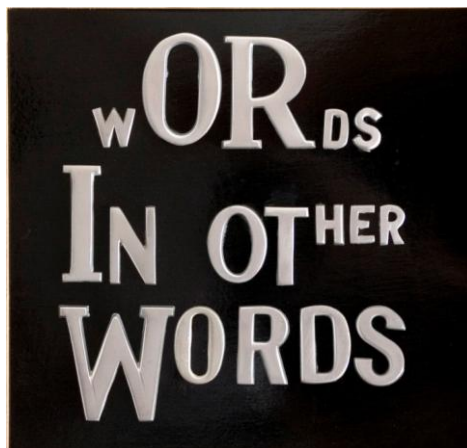


Fig. 2. John Havela, *wORds*, 2004, aluminium and enamel paint on wood, 25 x 25 cm.

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In an era of profoundly disturbing fundamentalisms which intransigently insist on the fixity of a sacred text and fanatically deny the plurality of meaning, opening up the semantic possibilities of language is hopefully not just a ludic but also a political gesture.

:

Canadian writer Gail Scott's emphasis on the need to listen and include other voices apart from English has helped me articulate my own poetics. She states that:

As a visibly white, English-speaking subject of the world, I wish to learn to be a small writing subject. To write a text that absorbs the voices I hear, regardless of the mother tongue.

To be a small writing subject writing a porous text necessarily requires putting self in abeyance in favour of listening. (203)

Much of my work is produced by listening to other dialects and languages which inevitably makes “a small writing subject” of the white, Anglo-Saxon “I” and focuses on the political implications of heterogeneity, by challenging, if only for a moment, the hegemony of English.

•

Macaroni

The comic potential of multilingualism is central to much of my work. Homophonic versions and deliberate mistranslations abound: “com toda a franqueza: with all the french cheese in the world” (“(:) 1” 43). A literal word by word version of the Portuguese might be “with all the frankness,” or more colloquially “in all honesty.” *Queza* is an approximate homophone of *queijo*, or closer still *queso* in Spanish, meaning cheese. After a reading once, a friend said he enjoyed the “macaronic” poems best.¹

•

I occasionally detect a discomfort in some of the English-speaking audience at my readings when I move between languages. “English? Hungarian? Portuguese? French? Who is the audience for your work?” someone once asked me. Basil Bunting used to read poems in a variety of languages to his students at the University of Victoria, and was convinced that they got as much from poems in languages that they couldn’t understand as from those read in English.

•

The organizers of the *Encontros Internacionais de Poetas* at the University of Coimbra in Portugal encourage poets to read in their mother tongues. The organizers implicitly argue that hearing poetry in languages we don’t understand can be a powerful and moving experience. Semantics cannot colonise the energies in language.

•

Jorge Semprún declares, “En fin de compte, ma patrie n’est pas la langue, ni la française, ni l’espagnole, ma patrie c’est le langage” (qtd. in Moure 217).

•

My ironic rendering of Semprún’s argument (fig. 3) also reconfigures the statement by one of Fernando Pessoa’s heteronyms, Bernardo Soares, in *Livro do Desassossego*: “A minha pátria é a língua portuguesa” (255).



Fig. 3. John Havelda, *MON PAYS C'EST TV*, 2004, aluminium on copper, 45 x 28 cm.

⋮

In Portugal, journalists often pepper their prose with English terms for which there are perfectly adequate Portuguese equivalents, suggesting that English is ideologically encumbered with urbanity, sophistication and economic power. (I have been asked several times why I choose to live in Portugal when life is so much better in England). My macaronic poems, which at times privilege Portuguese, Hungarian and French over English terms, try to tip up this implicit hierarchisation of languages and cultures. Currently, however, I am more drawn towards James Joyce's neologistic melding of languages within individual words as a way of embracing the foreign to extend English vocabulary, to make of English a "magnet language" as Marjorie Perloff has it (n.p.).

⋮



Fig. 4. John Havela, *MEANINGLÊS*, 2002, aluminium on copper, 40 x 9cm.

•

The aluminium letters in my work are used mostly in cemeteries in Portugal. My translation of them into an art world context is a kind of *détournement*, perhaps even a resurrection of this material, given that “translation” etymologically meant “to remove the body or the relics of a saint ... to carry or convey to heaven without death” (OED).

•

Language as Material: the Word as Such

The Russian Futurists Alexei Kruchenyk and Velimir Khlebnikov disrupted grammar and the sentence with “zaum”—a transrational poetry which focused entirely on sound. Much of my own awareness of the surface textures of language comes from being brought up in Hungarian and at least three Englishes: the dialect of the working class street in Leicester, its Grammar school correction, and the idiolect of my immigrant parents, with its wildly creative grammar and pronunciation. How could I have not noticed that words (were) matter when my father was convinced “a bloody else you are” was a highly colloquial English put down, and “pulling a curt” was something you did to let the light in.

•

The Canadian artist Ken Lum describes growing up in 1950s and early 1960s East Vancouver, a culturally diverse area thanks to immigration, as follows:

Every day, walking around in East Vancouver, there was a kind of juggling you had to do, in terms of how you reconciled or acknowledged other people of different backgrounds.... People from completely different backgrounds, not in command of English, with different sets of cultural values ... have to interact every day ... I think that provided a kind of basis for my work. (n.p.)

The fecundity of these linguistic and cultural differences is, furthermore, palpable in USAmerican poetry. The huge wave of immigration at the end of the nineteenth century into the United States led to a radical refashioning of English, to a variety of “inflected variants of a decentred confederacy,” as Charles Bernstein puts it (“Time” 107). Not having experienced English as a mother tongue, Gertrude Stein, William Carlos Williams and Louis Zukofsky “invented their language word by word, phrase by phrase” (“Time”109).

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“Poetry centered on the condition of its wordness—words of a language not out there but in here, language the place of our commonness—is a momentary restoration of ourselves to ourselves” (Bernstein, *Content’s* 29-30).

•

Sound Poetry

In the film *Listen* directed by David New, R. Murray Schafer argues that sound recording ironically has encouraged deafness. In pre-technological societies every sound was utterly transitory and unique—“every sound committed suicide” (Schafer qtd. in New n.p.). Our ability to record sounds means we don’t have to listen *now*, and are thus alienated from the actual experience of our lives. He argues that the function of art is to encourage people to listen and look carefully, a position which echoes John Cage's point that the “purposeless play” of writing music is not about improving the world but “waking up to the very life we are living, which is so excellent once one gets one’s mind and one’s desires out of its way and lets it act of its own accord” (“Experimental” 12). I woke up to the pleasures of aurality listening to Hungarian folk songs as a child, the lyrics of which I could barely understand, as well as Trojan label reggae artists in the 1960s and 1970s whose creole was often semantically meaningless to me, but nonetheless intoxicating. In the 1980s I was introduced to sound poetry by Hugo Ball’s “Karawane” via the Talking Heads’ version. But the key literary moment came in 1982 when I found myself within two metres of an Ernst Jandl rendition of “Schtzngrmm” and its spectacularly ambitious attempt to represent war through the raw material of a single manipulated and cut up word.

•

Although I have not published a significant body of sound poetry,² acoustic properties of language in my work are foregrounded. The linguistic choices I make are often generated as much by sound as semantics. “(:) 2” serves as an example:

all Hungarians know how to papricar: a low level sentence: cretan clad
magyar: as far as the i can tell: icon fat and Skegness anachronistic:
Alekos has a burro called Beethoven: jacket fit me nice: gyerek?:
babám i'm baffled by it all: not an iota: olasz catastrophe: cock eared
kirchen: azóta mix your cox and coils: coyly slowly laxly collapsed:
coyly kyrie eleison collision: ravasz coxly coyly sap: savoy savoir sa
voix: : you kneed me in the nose: i need you in the know: Jimmy the
Skull and the huldufolk (55)

“Papricar” (“to mollycoddle” in Portuguese, acoustically suggesting the essential Hungarian culinary ingredient: paprika) half rhymes with “magyar” and “far.” The quasi alliteration of “know” and “how” couples with “low.” The second syllable of “sentence” is echoed in that of “cretan,” while the alliteration of k sounds in “cretan clad” and “i can,” nudged to “icon,” is then amplified in “Skegness,” “anachronistic,” “Alekos,” “jacket” and “gyerek.” (“Jacket” in Jamaican English means a child born from the infidelity of a wife, while “gyerek” in Hungarian means children). This is followed by an alliterative cluster of b’s, m’s and l’s in “babám i’m baffled by it all.” (“Babám” in Hungarian means “my baby”). “Not an iota” rhymes translingually with the Hungarian “azóta.” A further flurry of k sounds drives forward until stalled by an abrupt concentration of sibilants in “sap: savoy savoir sa voix,” which mimics the school room rhythm of verb parsing. The k then returns, but this time silently in the punning of “knead” and “know,” before being resounded in “Skull” and “huldufolk.”

•

Language-Based Art

Image-text art is usually thought of as the combination or juxtaposition of the linguistic and the pictorial. From the outset, it seems to me important to emphasize text as *image*, a point I made in an interview with Robert Enright in *Border Crossings* (20). Words or even prelinguistic marks on surfaces function partly as images. Johanna Drucker puts this eloquently in her essay “The Art of the Written Image”:

writing’s visual forms possess an irresolvably dual identity in their material existence as images and their function as elements of language. Because of this fundamental dualism, writing is charged with binary qualities. It manifests itself with the phenomenal presence of the imago and yet performs the signifying operations of the logos. It is an act of individual expression and an instance of that most rule-bound and social of human systems—language. It is at once personal and social, unique and cultural, asserting real physical presence and functioning through intertextual chains of association and reference. It is both an object and an act, a sign and a basis for signification, a thing in itself and something coming into being, a production and a process, an inscription and the activity of inscribing. (57)

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Much of my academic work on image-text and language-based artists has focused on Canada, and specifically art generated in Vancouver, a city in which such practices have flourished since the 1960s. Among the important influences on my creative work are Ken Lum and Ron Terada. In the work of both artists, language, despite its

apparent transparency, is often polysemic and never simply anchors an image or object. The linguistic “messages” revel in what Roland Barthes refers to as “the terror of uncertain signs” (39).

•

Consider Ken Lum's *Taj Kebab Palace* (fig. 5), for example. At first sight, it looks like an authentic sign lifted from a cheap kebab joint on Vancouver's Kingsway: a piece of found art.



Fig 5. Ken Lum, *Taj Kebab Palace*, 2000, plexiglass, powder-coated lacquered aluminium, plastic letters, enamel paint, 214 x 214 x 11 cm, in *Ken Lum* (Vancouver: Contemporary Art Gallery, 2001): 25. © Contemporary Art Gallery, Michael Turner and Ken Lum.

The text “misuses” the shop sign to meld special deal with overt political statement, upsetting the stereotype of the apolitical open all hours immigrant small business. Furthermore, as I have analysed in my essay on Lum, the acoustic complexities are excessive in this context and closer to poetry than retail signage (“NOT” 178-9).

•

Ron Terada's signs are likewise not quite what they seem. For the Vancouver Contemporary Art Gallery's 2006 show *Concrete Language*, Terada produced a photograph of a sign bearing merely the title of the exhibition (fig. 6).



Fig. 6. Ron Terada, *Untitled (Concrete Language)*, 2006, ink jet print 111.8 x 139.7 cm.

As I have argued in my essay on Terada:

The bland lettering of commercial signage doesn't speak to the typographical pyrotechnics of the poetry to which it refers. Yet, the photograph of a sign placed in a vacant lot adjacent to piles of concrete girders, which when viewed end on look like "A"s, literally piles of concrete language or letters at least, the sign accurately identifies the territory, while in the background there is graffitid concrete wall—language *on* concrete. Terada's sign functions as a reading of what is at first sight an invisible urban scene, pointing up

the way language in landscape inevitably changes our relationship with place. (“How” 12)

This tactic, employed by both Lum and Terada, of presenting ostensibly transparent signs which are considerably more complex than at first sight, has influenced some of my own language-based art (fig. 7).

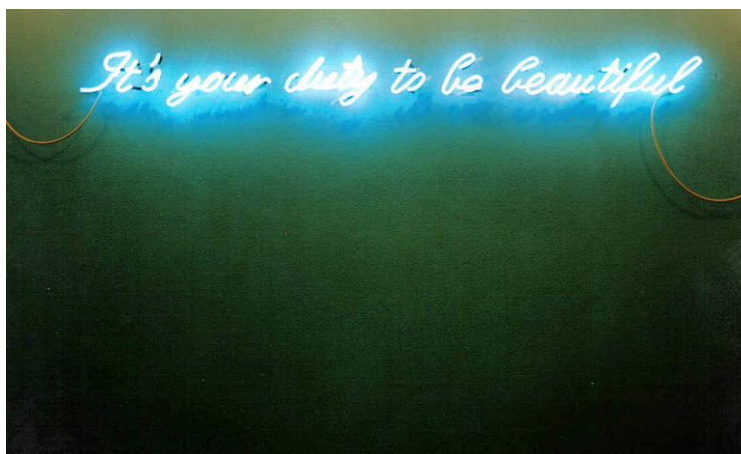


Fig. 7. John Havelda, *It's Your Duty to Be Beautiful*, 2000, neon tubing, 1m 20 cm x 30cm.

Reminiscent of an advertising jingle, the line is lifted from a staggeringly sexist Al Dubin song “Keep Young and Beautiful” in the 1933 Richard Tuttle film *Roman Scandals*. However, who is being addressed when this sentence is translated into a neon sign in a gallery? Most obviously the viewer. But if the language is seen as reflexive, then the beautiful turquoise neon sign is obeying its own demands. Neon might suggest consumerism with its dependence on beautifully packaged products. Or perhaps Art in general is the object of the sentence, and the sign becomes an argument on aesthetics.³

L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E: Emotions Expressed in Authentic Voices

Charles Bernstein summarizes his and Bruce Andrews' poetics at the inception of the magazine *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* as a "rejection of received and beloved notions of voice, self, expression, sincerity, and representation" ("Autobiographical" 249). Very little of my work is in any real sense in *my* voice. For example, *Know Your Place* (2005) is a text built largely from the offerings of other writers, and the "(:"s are for the most part collaged, disjunctive, (mis)read or (mis)heard fragments. There is no Self to be unveiled in my work, or the Self calls *itself* into question. To some extent, I use parataxis (as well as multilingualism) to argue implicitly against notions of fixed selves. In "(:" 3," a lower case "I" *does* seem to be having an emotional crisis: "i called the hospital i called the police station and you weren't there: where were you?" ("(:" 3" 55). However, the "you" of the previous phrase—"where have you been meaning?"—is either someone who has been discourteous enough to actually go around signifying (not meaning to do something but just meaning), or is *meaning* itself, perhaps a character called "meaning." In such a context, the "I" would be hard pushed to indicate a conventional, unified lyric subject.

Like Language Writing, my work questions the veracity of personal representations of experience and, hopefully, does not place the reader in the role of passive consumer of easily digested commodities. In Astra Taylor's film *Examined Life*, Avital Ronnell argues that "[a] lot of people have been fed and fuelled by promises of immediate gratification in thought and food ... and there's a politics of refusing that gratification" (Ronnell qtd. in Taylor n.p.). While she is talking about consumer capitalism's promise of instant accessibility in general terms, her argument is in perfect harmony with Language Writing's challenge of a communicative model of language in which a message in a relatively transparent medium is effortlessly

received. I hope my work is not immediately consumable and contributes to such politics. “(:) 16,” for example, begins with an emphatically alliterated and rhymed phrase that, with a metaphorical flourish, claims to answer the question “What is a poet?”: “the poet thinks he’s a pigeon but really he’s a spice rack Jack” (58). This may refer to carrier pigeons. If so, the poet is identified as a conveyor of messages, but the subordinate clause contradicts the delusion and argues that the poet is a set of condiments to add flavour. Thus, the poet’s job is more spice than message, more style or artifice than content. Read this way, the phrase is sympathetic to a critique of accessible poetry based on a communicative model of language. But what of Jack? It may be an American colloquialism for Everyman, but the name of the poet Jack Spicer is audible here, which might make the phrase a misheard version of his “A poet is a catcher more than a pitcher, but the poet likes to think of himself as a pitcher more than a catcher” (117), in which “pitcher” is skewed to “pigeon.” The poem continues “writing as a hold on: as hold on.” A possible paraphrase might be that ironically it is self-consciously artificial poetry that is closer to some kind of purchase on—“a hold on”—reality than “official verse culture,” and that such writing aims to slow our experience of language down—“as hold on.” However these opening phrases are read, they are not immediately apparent and there is little instant gratification.

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In “What’s the Word,” Charles Bernstein suggests that poems are “most pleasurable when you can’t quite work them out” (n.p.).

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On the installation, *Sun, Moon and Stars* (2007/08) by Fischli and Weiss, composed of tables of torn-out pages of magazine advertising, Andrew Maerke comments: “I couldn't really tell what was going on in the work. Afterwards what stayed with me was not the idea that I had missed something but rather the pleasure of having missed something” (n.p.).

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The Canadian poet Phil Hall parodies the poet for whom the expression of feeling is paramount: “I was trying to impress the reader with the nobility of my own feeling...I’m a finer feeler than you are. The killdeer came to represent that for me. The way people flop around on stage and say ‘My pain, my pain’” (n.p.). He further brings out the politics of such poetics by referring to them as “emotional fascism” (n.p.).

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I would like to see my poetics as a similar democratic gesture, and if I may be excused the much maligned and somewhat anachronistic Portuguese term *povo* (“the people,” maybe, but not quite) most associated with the *25 de Abril* revolution in Portugal, perhaps a “po(vo)ética.” Not necessarily a poetics that generates poems for the “common man or woman” (I have no illusions about universality), but one which certainly seeks to include as many languages, dialects, sociolects and idiolects as possible, and juxtapose them with no apology or need for explication, in what Emerson referred to as a “panharmonicon” (qtd. in Shields 16).

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Conceptual Writing

Some of my work leans towards methods developed by conceptual writing and writing that engages Oulipean constraints. It would be inaccurate to describe my work as purely conceptual, because although it is often driven by a concept, the pleasures of choice in composition are still important to me. Nonetheless, in *Echo and Narcissus* (2007), which I will address later, I *do* set up a machine that writes the text. I am more inclined towards Cage's emphasis on the *experience* of making work than absolute dematerialization as posited by Lawrence Weiner, for example, in his 1968 *Statements*:

1. The artist may construct the piece.
2. The piece may be fabricated.
3. The piece need not be built (qtd. in Goldsmith 65).

As Cage points out, work which is just a concept “obliges us to imagine that we know something *before* that something has happened. That is difficult, since the experience itself is always different from what you thought about it” (“Fifth” 153).

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Conceptual Rearticulations

In conversation with Pauline Butling and Susan Rudy in *Poets Talk*, Jeff Derksen argues that:

It seems that you have to be more within a system that you're going to critique. That is, moving away from an idea of opposition and resistance to an idea of rearticulation. That opposition and resistance has imagined itself as being outside of the debilitating structures of power, and has been critical from the exterior, whereas rearticulation is about disarticulating and rearticulating linkages within systems, somehow rearrange structures from within (sic). To be critical of a world system, you have to somehow imagine yourself within it, as opposed to barking at it from a local position. (Butling and Rudy 130-131)

My disarticulation and rearticulation of *English Guide for Hungarians* in "That Is Sensible Mrs. Gaspar" and of 1950s advertising in "Where Mr. Reagan Learnt His Craft" seek to expose ideological interiors of the language of pedagogy and advertising, for example. The function of the dialogues in *English Guide for Hungarians* is less to facilitate integration than shamelessly to celebrate post World War II U.S.A. In "That Is Sensible Mrs. Gaspar," using only quotations from the dialogues in *Angol Velemjáró: Társalgási Gyakorlatok, Nyelvtan és Szótár/ English Guide for Hungarians*, I rearticulated these panegyrics to foreground the source text's unconsciously comic construction of the grateful immigrant:

How do you like America?

Oh it's wonderful! Here
you have everything
we lacked in Hungary:
freedom good
salary plenty of food
good clothing. You can
listen to the radio
without fear.
You have many many
cars excellent
trains speedy buses

fine houses (homes).
 This is
 really a
 very good system
 and you can be
 proud of it.
 You should be
 thankful to God for
 all these things,
 shouldn't you? (118)

"Where Mr Reagan Learnt His Craft" argues the close proximity of advertising to recent and contemporary political rhetoric. Some years ago, I came across *Commercial Mania*, a compilation of 1950s U.S. television adverts that both recorded and helped generate the post World War II era of U.S. power. Before becoming President, Ronald Reagan learned a trade and earned a crust selling, among other things, soap. In dearticulating phrases from the adverts and rearticulating them into extended zappings, militarism and consumerism, for example, wind up in the same shopping basket:

leaves hair
 whistle clean
 where you go
 by your wings
 you'll be known go
 the air force way
 kills them by the million
 they're the cereals
 shot from guns
 1 2 3 his hair
 stays in place
 greaselessly (83)

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A month before winning the presidency, Barack Obama won Advertising Age's Annual "Marketer of the Year" for 2008. His campaign manager, David Plouffe, won Brandweek's "Marketer of the Year" for 2009.

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This poetics of rearticulation parallels the work of Brian Jungen, an artist of First Nations heritage raised by parents of Swiss and Dane-zaa descent. His remarkable transformations of dissected Nike Air Jordan training shoes into imitations of West Coast First Nations ceremonial masks, *Prototypes for New Understanding* (1998-2005), his restructuring of white, plastic garden furniture into vast skeletons of whales in *Shapeshifter* (2000), *Cetology* (2002), and *Vienna* (2003), and his *Court* (2004), in which a basketball court is made of 224 sweat shop sewing machines, all employ Derksen's "rearticulation" metaphorically. His work is not just within a world system, but built *of* the celebrated or common products of that system. There are no lamentations on the horrors of global capital and its destruction of local communities. The objects of global capital are indeed rearticulated into West Coast First Nations masks. Perhaps most clearly, the white plastic chairs are literally rearticulated, reconnected into whale skeletons. Jungen dismantles the products of

global capitalism to reinscribe them with references echoing local cultures of the west coast of British Columbia.

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mor



Fig. 8. John Havelda, *mor*, 1995 oil and wax on wood, 50 x 50 cm.

In Portuguese, *mor* means “first” or “principal,” as in *capitão-mor*. I was unaware of this inappropriate celebration of my own work when I chose the title for the book, but am now grateful for its ironic immodesty. Rather, I intended my choice of “*mor*” to refer to headwords in a dictionary. The implicit pun in inscribing “*mor*” and other headwords on the foreheads of wax *ex-votos* points to the linguistic energies in these monosyllables. At the time I was reading the Portuguese playwright Gil Vicente’s *A Tragicomédia de Dom Duardos* (1562) and was struck by the lines “*Do amor e da Fortuna/ não há defesa nenhuma*”⁴ (106). The headword “*mor*,” then, simultaneously looks towards “*amor*” and “*morte*,” love and death (fig. 8). But the phoneme is hardly exhausted there, and can spray in any number of other directions: *moral*, *morder*, (to bite) *morno*, (tepid) *morfina*, *amorfo*, (amorphous) *remorso* (remorse) etc.

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Writing *on* and Gramsci

In *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (1971), Gramsci exhorts: “[know] thyself” as a product of the historical process to date which has deposited in you an infinity of traces, without leaving an inventory. The first thing to do is to make such an inventory” (324). I sought to give this idea sculptural form in a rather literal reading of “trace.” What has been written on the body (politic)? The heads in *mor* then bear inscriptions. In earlier abandoned versions I buried whole body wax *ex-votos* in textual fragments. However, such a plethora of text encourages a more passive role in the viewer. I finally opted for a single phoneme as a more effective catalyst for the production of a word or phrase by the viewer. The headword invites her to complete the fragment, to write on the pieces. In so doing, she hopefully catches herself in a reflexive act of trace making.

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Both “Written on My Father” (56) and “Crime Fighting in Islington” (54) in *mor* are generated by the idea of being written on. The former refers to human branding—my father bore the prisoner of war tattoo to his grave—and the latter refers to Joe Orton’s and Kenneth Halliwell’s imprisonment in 1962 for the crime of defacing, or rather *détourner*, library books.

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Hanging's Too Good for Them

A popular and economic punishment of homosexuals carried out by the Inquisition was to saw their victims in half. They were hung upside down to reduce the loss of blood, thereby prolonging the torture (fig. 9). In *Hanging's Too Good for Them* (fig.10), I split an *ex-voto* wax head in half to translate this ecclesiastical barbarity. (The pun in the title also points to hanging the pieces of *mor* on the walls of a gallery).



Fig. 9. Franziscus Grotius, *The Fate of Three Homosexuals*, 1474, woodcut.



Fig.10. John Havelda, *Hanging's Too Good for Them*, 1995, oil and wax on canvas, 50 x 30 cm.

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To use the title of Deborah Cameron's book, the "verbal hygiene" in *Como se escreve uma carta* is extended to a chromatic hygiene. Only black, blue, green and purple inks may be used in letter writing. Under no circumstances should red be contemplated. I, thus, used red lettering in the accompanying language pieces of the wax heads of *mor* (fig. 11). The texts are all direct quotations from *Como se escreve uma carta*. The one below, "IN THIS BOOK/ WE WILL NOT/ CONCERN OURSELVES/ WITH THE AFFAIRS OF/ BUSINESS/ AN AREA OF LITTLE/ STYLE CARE/AND CLASS" ironically distances art from the sordid and debased world of economics within the pages of an expensively produced book.



Fig. 11. John Havelde, *NESTA OBRA*, 1995, ink on paper, 20 x 16 cm.

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“What Are Poems for?”

The germ of the poem is Edwin Morgan’s “Opening the Cage: 14 Variations on 14 Words” (17), which transposes John Cage’s “I have nothing to say and I am saying it and that is poetry” (“Lecture” 109). “What Are Poems for?” represents a move towards a poetics: an attempt to articulate the function of poetry. The final imperative, “I know what poems are for. Don’t” (20), with its monosyllabic expression of distaste, I hope, silences the prior ingenuous enthusiasm.

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“Four Ways of Looking at Pictures”

The two aphoristic kernels of this piece are framed by a pompous “professional” and a naïve, amateur critical voice (28/30). Of the two frames I’m not sure which is the less sophisticated.

In the second section, I reconfigured a response by William Carlos Williams to an audience who remained utterly silent after he had read a short poem. He advised them: “Dont try to work it out: listen to it.” The third section refutes Williams, and argues that an unmediated response is impossible, or in Kenneth Burke’s terms, that all language is necessarily dramatic.⁵

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“What the Gallery Told John”

The poem, the title of which echoes Basil Bunting’s “What the Chairman Told Tom” (1965), adds a neoliberal monologue to the four ways of looking at pictures (34). It is essentially a found poem that parodies the crass, opportunistic attitudes of some New

York gallerists of the booming 1980s who were besotted with “THE AFFAIRS OF/ BUSINESS.”

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“You’ve Done It Again/ Lá Voltaste a Fazer”

Bob Perelman once told me he knew a poet who was close friends with a painter, but the poet found the painter’s canvasses bland and poorly executed. At the painter’s every opening, the poet wrestled with his conscience. He was unable to congratulate his friend enthusiastically, though feared that total honesty would destroy their relationship. Finally he hit upon the solution. Shaking the painter’s hand vigorously he effused, “Don, you’ve done it again.” Soon after hearing this story it struck me that a number of people were reacting to my readings with the same word:

“interesting.” The adjective began to seem heavily euphemistic. “You’ve Done It Again/ Lá Voltaste a Fazer” spins a multilingual web of real and imagined reactions to my work in the spirit of Perelman’s acquaintance. I hope that part of the pleasure of hearing the piece is due to the way the repetitive structure transforms the opacity of foreign languages into comprehensible utterances. A monoglot finds himself understanding (to an extent at least) Portuguese, French and Hungarian (42).

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Fig.12. John Havelda, *andonandon*, 2003, oil on canvas, 100 x 50 cm.

The painting *andonandon* (fig. 12) also sprang from the Perelman anecdote. The apparent bleakness of the palimpsestic repetition is soon dissipated when read paragrammatically—*andonandon* contains “onan.”⁶

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“(s)”

The germ for these poems is a quote from Osip Mandelstam’s poem “54” in *Stone*: “improvise songs/out of the troubles of the day” (6). Each of the pieces is produced from collaged material gathered over the course of twenty-four hours. Initially, I thought of the phrases as musical units and split them up with bar lines, and like conventional notation each line was composed of four bars. However the vertical bar lines ground the phrases to a halt, while what I wanted was speed, an experiential flow. The colon has the same verticality but is *graphically* porous: two dots as opposed to a solid line allow a greater flow from one phrase to the next.

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A colon also promises clarification, even a logical step. I use the colon somewhat ironically, as the shifts from one phrase to another are guided by anything but syllogistic demands. Loose connections and hypotactic play generate ways of slipping through the gaps between the dots. “(:) 1” begins “this is an english world” (43). The dubiousness of the initial claim is latent in the lower case “e.” The poem immediately contradicts itself and mistranslates “world” by “palavra” i.e. “word.” The third phrase, in turn, homophonically mistranslates “palavra” for “palaver” (although the two words are clearly related etymologically to the Latin “*parabola*”), and adds the synonym “carry on,” the title of the series of iconic English films of the 1960s. It may well be an English world after this opening duel: the resignation of the next phrase “have I come back to you my old country?” seems to point in that direction. However the implicit answer that follows, “a slaughterhouse called “cruel amado e filho lda” (literally “cruel loved and sons ltd”) might suggest otherwise.

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In “Bill Bissett: a Writing Outside Writing” (2000), Steve McCaffery argues that grammar is a “repressive mechanism designed to regulate the free flow of language” because it imposes “a centred (and centralized) meaning through a specific mode of temporalization” (98). In other words, grammatically-realized meaning offers readers a postponed reward, which is attained “at the end of a horizontal, linearized sequence of words” (98). Grammar for McCaffery thus “commands hierarchy, subordination, and postponement” (98). His polymorphous, non-linear poetic form, which often

bypasses standard grammatical rules altogether, could equally be applied to my poem “(:) 11,” which begins “awfully beautifully pictures of a man in a backwards apronly: the duchess of pencil is swim ring regina: not haste yet plain: tootle horn” (56). The first phrase hovers around standard grammar and seems to “make sense,” though the first two adverbs do not qualify the noun “pictures,” and the two final adverbs—“backwards” and the neologistic “apronly”—seem to be struggling to pose as adjective and noun. The subject, verb, predicate of the second phrase is syntactically straightforward. The phrase *sounds* as if it should be completely transparent, but it is semantically somewhat slippery. Likewise, “not haste yet plain” has the familiar ring of an idiom, though shimmers out of focus. “Tootle horn” is almost standard English, but the slight “error” tilts the meaning of the phrase. In this poem, the reader is freed from the temporality of grammar and the accumulation of meaning towards a fixed *telos*. McCaffery’s version of Language Writing sets a precedent for my work because it offers readers no “postponed reward” waiting for them at the end of the poem, no semantic treat tying the piece together into a unified meaning.

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“Marrakesh”

This poem is very much indebted to recordings of Paul Bowles’ readings which often include ambient sounds. “Marrakesh” is collaged mostly from acoustic fragments I recorded over a two week period, and can perhaps be read as a sketch of a city’s idiolect (49/50).

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“Huat Iz Tu Bi Dan?”

“Huat Iz Tu Bi Dan?” is an idiolect poem which challenges the marginalisation of immigrant English, one of the least authoritative voices (106). The phonetic focus of the poem privileges the acoustic properties of language, and the piece is best read with the ears as well as the eyes.

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“Versailles KY”



Fig.13. Paul-Henry Chombart de Lauwe, “Trajets pendant un an d'une jeune fille du XVI^e arrondissement,” *Paris et l'agglomération parisienne* (vol.1) (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1952; print; 106).

Paul-Henry Chombart de Lauwe's 1957 map of a young woman's movements for a year through the 16th arrondissement of Paris reveals a very limited and repetitive use of the city (fig. 13). Guy Debord argues that such maps are “examples of modern poetry capable of provoking sharp emotional reactions (in this case indignation at the fact that there are people who live like that)” (n.p.). “Versailles KY,” made solely

from signs on the main road through the town, suggests the limitation and repetition of a fast food and alcohol fuelled fundamentalism. The poem begins:

Liquor

Sizzlin Ponderosa

Evangelical Beer Bud

King Taco John (138)

There is a parallel here with Robert Fitterman's "Metropolis 16" which describes repetitious consumer trajectories by citing the names of shops in malls (219).

However, "Versailles KY" hybridises elements from separate signs for comic as well as political effect, as in:

wait we sold

more for

less Lord

Jesus Schlitz (138)

:

"Le Lapsus"

"Le Lapsus," a misheard quote, is an early instance of homophonic translation. "Les destins sont terribles" becomes "lesdi/ stanc/ esson/ tterr/ ibles." Distances (as opposed to destinies) between letters break down and the paragram starts to take hold:

lesdi
stanc
esson
tterr

l
st
t
ib
t
s
e

e
es
t
e

ibles
s d
a n c
son
e r r
les
n
r
e (143)

i
c
r
s
s

“Les” in “terribles” is foregrounded, and more importantly “son” in “sont,” so sound becomes audible as the sentence scatters into a constellation of letters, or the letter as such.

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“cardiology tea”

One of the effects of L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E writing is to slow reading down.

Distancing letters within words is clearly one way to achieve this. In “cardiology tea,” the distribution of the letters on the page paragrammatically highlights “do” in “down” to encapsulate the argument that slowing down is perhaps the best way to proceed, the best way to avoid a cup of tea on the cardiology ward (144).

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“Towards a Dignified Survival”

The poem redistributes not the letters but the larger elements on the page by shifting the position of the title in order to stage a kind of mimetic effect of the lines—"up" at the top of the page, "down" at the bottom (146).

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“SLOTH” and “PREGUIÇA”

The English and Portuguese for the cardinal sin are left incomplete in four different ways, which like the meticulous graphic layout of the piece seeks to deconstruct the binary of sloth/industry (fig.14)

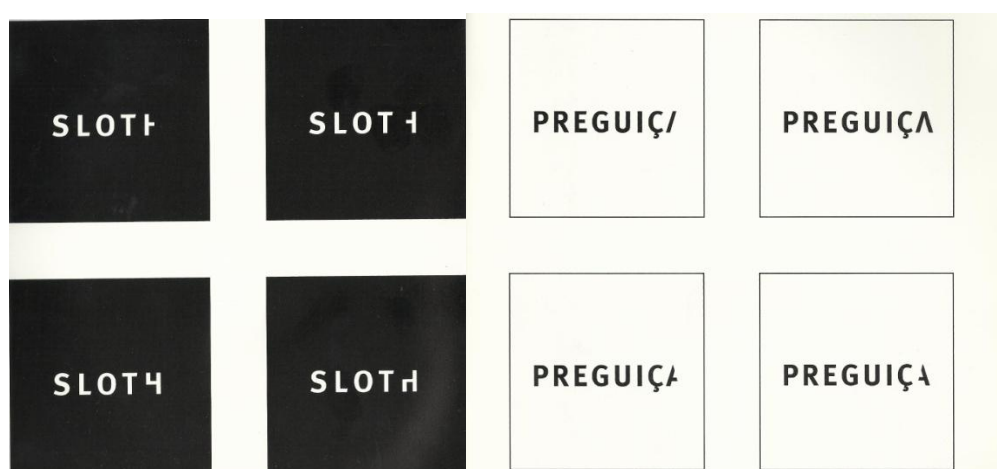


Fig. 14. John Havelda, “SLOTH/ PREGUIÇA,” *mor* (Porto: Macedonia Livros, 1997; print; 148-9).

I later translated the piece to sixteen juxtaposed 70 x 70 cm canvasses, eight of which bore the missing fragments of the letters H and A. The comic tension between form and content is increased—so much laborious production announcing so much sloth.

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Combine

In 1953, unannounced and bearing a bottle of Jack Daniels, Robert Rauschenberg visited Willem de Kooning to ask for a drawing to erase. Reluctantly, de Kooning

provided a particularly stubborn piece which was partly made of oils for Rauschenberg to produce *Erased de Kooning Drawing*. *Combine* is a reading of Rauschenberg's work focusing primarily on the language in the pieces and on the walls of the gallery at the Pompidou Centre where his *Combines* were shown in 2006. Much of Rauschenberg's work, then, is appropriately "erased" in my reading.

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Echo and Narcissus

The piece is a kind of lipogram in which, instead of suppressing a particular letter, I include only monosyllables and the final syllables of polysyllabic words—that which would be stereotypically echoed.

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Craig Dworkin in his list of copiers in literature ends with Echo who

literally, always has the last word ... Ostensibly a passive victim of the wrath of Juno, Echo in fact becomes a model of Oulipean ingenuity: continuing to communicate in her restricted state with far more personal purpose than her earlier gossiping, turning constraint to her advantage, appropriating other's language to her own ends, "making do" as a verbal *bricoleuse*. (xlvi)

In imposing Oulipean restriction I seek to generate a contemporary translation of *Echo and Narcissus* from Bulfinch's Victorian source text. By including only monosyllables or final syllables, the myth as recounted by Bulfinch is translated into Echo's version.

necessary to shapeshift from English to Portuguese: the stretch required to reach or transpose a note from the source into the target language.

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As the main researcher of the project that was funded by an International Research Program Grant from the International Council of Canadian Studies, 2004, I was responsible for a little more than a third of the work. Although I wrote the application for the grant and presented an initial selection of poets to be included in the anthology, Isabel Patim, Manuel Portela and I were equally responsible for the translations and notes. Indeed, whatever strengths there might be in the translations are due to a *collaborative* reworking of an initial version of each poem that one of us produced.

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We eschewed the adjective “Canadian,” with its essentialist connotations, and opted for “Contemporary Poetry from Canada.” Our goal was not to establish an alternative Canadian identity (indeed, many of the poets anthologized, while referencing local history and geography, would situate their work in an international context), but to amplify work beyond official Canadian verse culture. Born between 1925 and 1966, and spanning three generations, the thirteen poets are very different. However, there are, we hope, clear connections. In one way or another, all the poets included in the anthology challenge fossilized poetic strategies which refuse to question language as a natural medium of expression (“no language is neutral” as Dionne Brand has it), by

embracing, artifice, materiality and disjunctive parataxis. However, more specific configurations are possible. bpNichol and Steve McCaffery, who closely collaborated as the Toronto Research Group, have been a powerful influence on many of the poets anthologized here, not least Christian Bök, Jeff Derksen and Karen Mac Cormack. The politics of racial identity are central to the work of Fred Wah, Roy Miki and Dionne Brand, as are gender politics to the work of Erin Moure, Karen Mac Cormack and Lisa Robertson. Prairie writing is represented by the work of Robert Kroetsch and Dennis Cooley. Links between Canadian and the US American poetry are implicit in the inclusion of Robin Blaser, who along with Jack Spicer and Robert Duncan was a key figure in San Francisco before moving to Vancouver in 1966. Fred Wah studied with Robert Creeley, and as a member of the Tish group brought Charles Olson to lecture in Vancouver. Established in 1984, the Kootenay School of Writing, an important writer run centre with strong international links, is represented by Jeff Derksen, Lisa Robertson, Fred Wah and Roy Miki. These constellations and others go some way towards justifying the very limited number of poets included.

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We were never in any doubt that we wanted to avoid an anthology of dozens of names with a couple of poems each, skimming superficially across experimental Canadian poetry, so we attributed between 6 and 12 pages to each poet, in which appear poems from different periods, including a recent poem, and an extract from a long poem or a cycle of poems.

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The book's square format was the best way to accommodate the considerable variety of forms, so that the *pages* could be translated as well as the language. The book itself, as object and visual space, is a translation.

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At times our translation choices were driven more by the acoustic than semantic properties of the source poems. It was, though, occasionally possible to combine the two. The section from Steve McCaffery's *Lag*, ends "Nature not Nietzsche," (276). *Natureza não Nietzsche* would be obvious and acceptable, but would sacrifice the acoustic parallel of tʃ. Thus we opted for "nicho", meaning "nest" to stand metonymically for Nature (Havelda, Patim and Portela. 163).

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There were moments when we were defeated as translators. This occurred most often when the English poem presented an ambiguity unavailable in Portuguese. Karen Mac Cormack's "Saltarello" includes the line "Rest of her on an activity without focus" (18). The ambiguity of the first word is I think impossible to render in Portuguese—"o resto" means a part, while "rest" as in a pause or sleep might be "*descanso*." The visual and acoustic gap between the two terms is impossible to bridge, so we were forced to opt for one or the other. However, there were moments when the Portuguese was more malleable. In Mac Cormack's "Self Fashion," the

second word in the line “effectiveness links” (62) might be a noun or a verb. We were able to maintain this ambiguity by bracketing a suffix in “*efectividade liga(ções)*” (139).

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Translating Roy Miki’s extended paragram “wa(l)king to the new moon” is practically impossible, which was part of the pleasure of trying. We chose to translate the two nouns in the second line “wave rings” (10) and abandon their possible union into “waverings.” With hindsight, I think it would have been preferable to sacrifice partially the semantic meaning of the separate nouns and translate “wave rings” as *hesitava* (s/he hesitated), which could have been cleaved to *hesita* (s/he hesitates) and *va* (s/he goes). The paragrammatic effect of “wave rings” is maintained, and the very word *hesitava* hesitates, or wavers. In the sixth line, Miki expands “reaches” to “re aches” (10). *Atinge* is “reaches” in Portuguese, which we split to “*a tinge*,” meaning “the” (singular feminine definite article) “dyes” (third person singular simple present tense verb). Again, this is not semantically accurate, but in the twelfth line we were able to reference “aches” by the paragram *corre dor* meaning roughly “runs pain” (187).

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Given the importance of the context of reception—that these poets were likely to be unknown to the vast majority of a Portuguese audience—we included copious notes and support material, to offer a kind of cultural translation.

reproduce the text in English wouldn't have helped me; they would have created an archaic-sounding result—bland, remote, not-present. ("Fidelity" 192)

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McCaffery has explored the field of translation, partly in order to excavate the profound "otherness" of language. In "The Unposted Correspondence" (2002), he argues that conventional translation is burdened by its support of an "ultimate signified" which has never been "released into the freedom of deviation and the lie," and that it does not allow for a deconstructive pressure being brought to bear on its "preinscriptions" (355). Allowing such a pressure "offer[s] the translator a way out from her role as historical victim to an anterior authorship and release[s] the translative operation into positive stresses on independence, autogenesis, mobility, and drift" (355). Much like Moure's and McCaffery's, my translation projects attempt to challenge the desirability or even the possibility of carrying a truth value from one text to another. As McCaffery writes,

[t]o think this way (of translations as deliberate mutilations of their source demanding in that abuse the authentication of their difference as a suppressed element within the same) is to think of translation as a technique of murdering without pain ("Unposted" 356).

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Robert Filiou and George Brecht's discussions about translating the *The Communist*

Manifesto into all the dialects of the world spurred McCaffery on to render the text in his native West Riding of Yorkshire dialect as *The Kommunist Manifesto or Wot We Wukkerz Want* (1977). Samuel Moore's translation of Marx and Engels begins:

A spectre is haunting Europe—the spectre of Communism. All the powers of old Europe have entered into a holy alliance to exorcize this spectre: Pope and Czar, Metternich and Guizot, French Radicals and German police-spies.

Where is the party that has not been decried as Communistic by its opponents in power? Where is the opposition that has not hurled back the branding reproach of Communism, against the more advanced opposition parties, as well as against its reactionary adversaries? (31).

In McCaffery's translation, this becomes:

Nah sithi, thuzzer booergy-mister mouchin an botherin awl oer place -
units booergy-mister uh kommunism. Allt gaffers errawl Ewerup's
gorrawl churchified t' booititaht: thuzimmint vatty unt king unawl, unner
jerry unner frogunt froggy bothermekkers, unt jerry plain cloouz bobbiz.
Nah then - can thar tell me any oppuhzishun thurrent been calder kommy
bithem thuts runnint show? Urrunoppuzishun thurrent chucks middinful
on themuzintfrunt un themuzintback unawl? (171).

Clearly McCaffery's principal aim is to underline the dubious politics of translating a rally call to working class revolution into Standard English. How could "a manifesto designed to inspire the working class to a world revolution be effectively conveyed in stunted Victorian English prose?" ("Notes" 373). However, to any reader not conversant with the West Riding dialect, *Wot We Wukkerz Want* will inevitably slide in and out of semantic focus, and at times the pleasure in listening or in reading the

text aloud will be purely on the level of sound.

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Unparalleled Candour

The piece returns to the found material of *Como se escreve uma carta*, and builds on the quotations from that book in *mor*. The three texts per page can be read individually or simultaneously, in which case the three elements fuse into palimpsestic, multilingual sound poetry (fig. 16). Unconventional translation strategies generate phrases that would be practically impossible to imagine in the confines of a grammatical system. If as Wittgenstein has it “*the limits of my language mean the limits of my world*” (56), then these new orderings, arrived at through such translations, perhaps challenge linguistic authority and potentially extend, however modestly, the limits of the world in English.

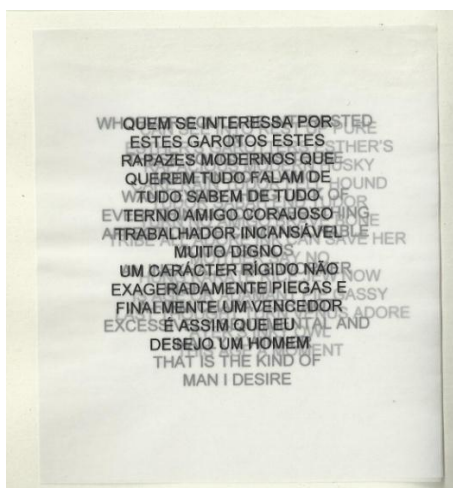


Fig.16. John Havela, *Unparalleled Candour* (Porto: de Corrida Edições, 2005) n.p.

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750 Hungarian Proverbs

In 1984, I wrote a review for *Canadian Literature* of George Faludy's *Learn This Poem of Mine by Heart*. The translations, I argued, struggled; not least because it is impossible in English to generate the musicality of a language in which every first syllable is stressed ("In" 100). The project of *750 Hungarian Proverbs* seeks to use a variety of unconventional translation techniques to sidestep the acoustic impossibilities that normative translations from Hungarian must negotiate. My choice of banal source texts—the "cackle" of Hungarian—connects this work with my "(;)s."

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Proverbs present themselves as common sense wisdom, bolstered by rhythmic anesthesia: music to nod along to. *750 Hungarian Proverbs* is an extended parody of and antidote to the virus of proverbial common sense, and has echoes in a number of phrases in the "(;)s. In "(;) 15," the cliché "when good men do nothing, evil prevails," a phrase that was mobilized during debates on the justice or otherwise of the Bush/Blair Iraq invasion, I translate as "when gored men do nothing eiffel prevails" (58).

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20.

Aki nem tud arabusul, ne beszéljen arabusul.

Our key name toward
 horror Bush
 shall never say
 “Horror Bush shall.”

Arab Bush.

Say

An Arab

Bush.

IGNORANCE IS BLITZ YET

AGAIN. (“Hungarian” 61)

The first line is the Hungarian proverb. This recontextualization is itself already a kind of translation. The second section is a homophonic translation from Hungarian to English, while the third section seeks to bring out anything that might be buried in the language by employing allusive referential translation. The final section dispenses with accuracy or “fidelity” as Moure might have it, for “felicity” in order to bring out the contemporary political implications of the original Hungarian.

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Tiles/ Azulejos

The tile—*azulejo*—is a quintessential Portuguese icon. “Azul” means blue. I chromatically mistranslate, in *blue* ink, *amarelo*, *verde* and *vermelho*, which links these pieces to the chromatic crime of using red ink in *mor*. Breaking up the words for colours into syllabic fragments reconfigures them into paragrams, to suggest that with the slightest pressure, even the most basic language spins out of semantic control. *Amarelo* becomes “AMAR/ELO” (fig. 17) meaning “To love/connection,” while *verde* becomes “VER/DE” (fig. 18) meaning “to see of” and *vermelho* becomes “VER/ME/LHO” (fig. 19) meaning “to see me to him.” Language, the pieces indicate, is pregnant with the subversion of clear messages, and with the slightest provocation is disposed to the wildest semantic lurches.



Fig. 17. John Havelde, *AMAR/ELO*, 2007, ink on tile, 14 x 14 cm.



Fig. 18. John Havelde, *VER/DE*, 2007, ink on tile, 14 x 11 cm.



Fig. 19. John Havelda, *VER/ME/LHO*, 2007, ink on tile, 14 x 14 cm.

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Paragrams and *Like Meaning off a Duck's Back*

I had been making short visual/verbal abstract pieces with aluminium letters for a while, seeking to foreground the materiality of language, when Steve McCaffery described to me the way in which bpNichol used paragrams in *The Martyrology*. I began to experiment with different letter sizes in short faux aphoristic phrases, and from within even the apparently quietest words, a variety of suppressed texts began to call out for attention, unsettling any claim to fixed, tidy meaning (fig. 20)



Fig. 20. John Havelda, *HEAT*, 2003, aluminium and enamel paint on wood, 25 x 25 cm.

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The Martyrology's closed world of semantic order is thus constantly relativized by a syntactic procedure that economizes the space, surface and materiality of the writing. But this relativization of the two economies promotes tensions between them, not differences; each phrase is *itself* only insofar as it is also *another*: no where nowhere now here. And what this "comic stripping of the bared phrase" motivates is the radical irresolution of meaning. The proposal, constantly implied, is that the word can never be reduced to a *single* signification. There will always be a threat to any word's or phrase's supposed semantic stability, a possibility of loss, of a scramble into *something else*. (McCaffery, "Martyrology" 63)

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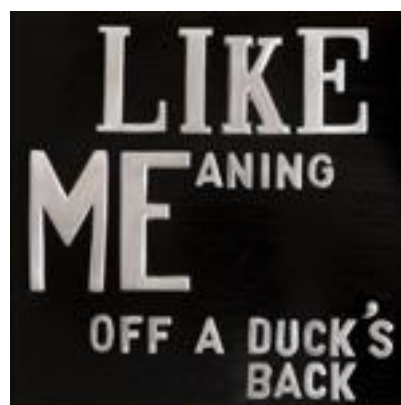


Fig.21. John Havela, *LIKE MEANING*, 2003, aluminium and enamel paint on wood, 25 x 25 cm.

This title piece of the series (fig. 21) distorts an idiom to a surrealistic enigma suggesting the slipperiness of meaning, while the ambiguous, alternative reading (“LIKE ME OFF A DUCK’S BACK”) offers two comic cartoon images, depending on whether the first word is read as adjective or imperative.

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Fig. 22. John Havela, *OLHO*, 2003, aluminium and enamel paint on wood, 25 x 25 cm.

A translation of the language in this piece (fig. 22) might be “The eye has nothing to see,” or “The eye has got nothing to do with it,” but the poverty of such versions in their deflection of the visual and material aspects foregrounds the problems of normative translation. Steve McCaffery and bpNichol point out that it “involves a shift in notation” which falsely “supposes that the method of codifying reality does not affect our perception of it” (27).

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Fig. 23. John Havelda, *ORDURE*, 2003, aluminium and enamel paint on wood, 25 x 25 cm.

John Cage states that “Our intention is to affirm this life, not an attempt to bring order out of chaos ...” (“Lecture” 95). A Cagean gesture, this playful homophonic translation seeks to debunk the arrogance of an authoritarian poetics of control (fig. 23).

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Fig. 24. John Havelda, *OSTRANENIE*, 2003, aluminium on copper, 46 x 29 cm.

Both the idiom “barking up the wrong tree” and the Russian Formalists’ *ostranenie*, meaning defamiliarisation, are defamiliarised (fig. 24). The fusion of the two references questions my use of the Russian Formalist argument here—perhaps *ostranenie* (making an idiom strange) *is* barking up the wrong tree. The piece simultaneously adopts and doubts the Russian Formalist position.

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Fig. 25. John Havela, *SEVERE*, 2003, aluminium and enamel paint on wood, 25 x 25 cm.

Applying translingual paragrammatic pressure to the word “severe” turns it into a self-translating machine—*ver* meaning “see” in Portuguese (fig. 25).

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Fig. 26. John Havelda, *PAIN'T*, 2003, aluminium and enamel paint on wood, 25 x 25 cm.

The piece is disingenuous: the word “paint” is not paint but *alumínio* (fig. 26). The letters fragment into “*pai*” (father), “pain,” and “ain’t,” as well as condensing the sentence “Paint ain’t pain,” which challenges the posture of the angst ridden artist in his lonely garret.

⋮



Fig. 27. John Havelda, *ALENQUER*, 2003, aluminium and enamel paint on wood, 25 x 25 cm.

“Alenquer,” the name of a small town in central Portugal, when read paragrammatically produces “Alen,” a homophonic version of *além* (beyond) and “*quer*” (s/he wants), while a multilingual reading would offer “leer.” “Alenquer” is not beyond desire but pregnant with it (fig. 27).

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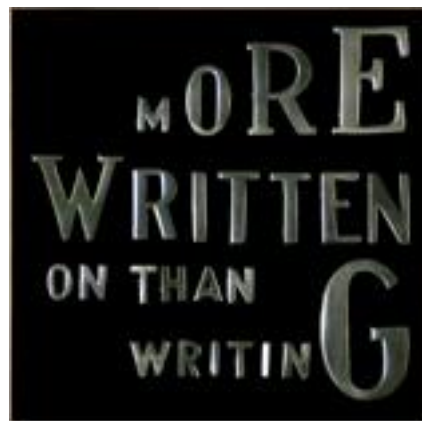


Fig. 28. John Havela, *MORE*, 2003, aluminium and enamel paint on wood, 25 x 25 cm.

Misquoting Lear’s “I am a man/ more sinned against than sinning” (III ii 59-60), I seek here to reconfigure Gramsci’s argument, that the self is the product of “an infinity of traces” (324), the germ of the wax heads of *mor*, whose title is clearly referenced in the first word of this piece (fig. 28).

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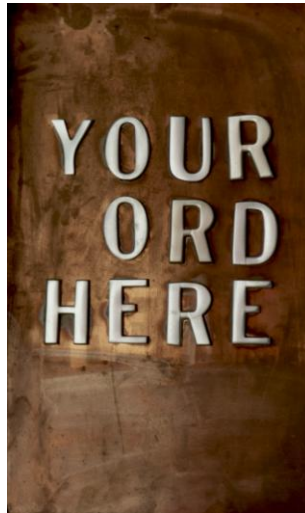


Fig. 29. John Havela, *YOUR ORD HERE*, 2004, aluminium on copper, 33 x 18 cm.

The basic premise of the Kabbalah is a belief that the letters came first; before writing or language, even before the creation of the universe—to which the magic of letters is directly attributed. An example of the power of the letter is demonstrated in the famous legend of the golem; a kind of servant formed out of clay, and brought to life by certain rituals of prayer and fasting. Across its forehead is written the word EMET, which means truth. Each day the golem grows in size and strength until it must be stopped. This can only be done by erasing the first letter E from the word, making MET—“he is dead”—and the golem returns to clay or dust. (Elliman 70)

As well as drawing on the Golem myth, this piece points back to the wax heads of *mor*, and the way in which the production of meaning is ideologically charged. The choice of the letter or letters to complete the fragment, or indeed the choice to leave it alone, brings up questions about which habits or forces prompt particular readings. The phrase “YOUR/ ORD /HERE” references the advert for billboard space “YOUR NAME HERE,” which might encourage the viewer to envisage “WORD” (fig. 29).

Whichever word is written by the viewer—“LORD,” “SWORD” or “FORD” perhaps—is “his word.” The four I find myself writing here suggest a ready and uneasy proximity of language, religion, violence and consumerism.

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“The Implosion of the Vulgar Tongue”

I think that our idea of words being a mere algebra, of words being an algebra of symbols, comes from the dictionaries. I do not want to be ungrateful to the dictionaries. My favourite reading would be Dr. Johnson, Dr. Skeat and that composite author The Shorter Oxford. And yet I think that the fact of having long catalogues of words and explanations makes us think that the explanations exhaust the words.... But a poet should feel that every word stands by itself, that every word is unique, and we get that feeling when a writer uses a little known word....So this idea of words beginning as magic and being brought back to magic by poetry is, I think, a true one. (Borges n.p.)

My poem “The Implosion of the Vulgar Tongue” is built from the headwords of the *Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue* (1811). As well as being useful tools, dictionaries seek to tame words and have long been agents of social control.⁷ The political implications of marginalizing non-standard English, for example, are succinctly presented in the slightest shift of article in Tom Leonard’s poem “AN / OXFORD / DICTIONARY/ OF / AN / ENGLISH / LANGUAGE” (n.p.).

“The Implosion of the Vulgar Tongue” ends:

HOG MAS HOL MAL HOO LYE

HOR LUYR HUB LOU HUM LON

HIT LOB HUP LIN JAC LIB

JAN LAZ JEW LAN

INK KON JOB KNO

JUM KIT IVI KIM

KEN KIC (111)

My chiasitic reading turns the headwords into a sound poem which attempts to reinvest the language of the *1811 Dictionary* with secrecy and Borgesian strangeness and magic. Alternatively, the poem might be read as an example of what John Cage refers to as “demilitarized language,” in which conventional syntax is disrupted. From this perspective, “The Implosion of the Vulgar Tongue” is aligned with *MEANINGLÊS*, since, according to Cage, another type of demilitarization occurs when “the boundaries between two or more languages are crossed” (“Foreword” n.p.).

⋮

“Broomwork”

In *Anarchy*, Cage suggests that the fragments he uses produce a kind of music, or in Marshall McLuhan’s terms, brush information against information (Introduction vi). “Broomwork” is a performance piece for two voices which brushes together Luís de Camões’ love sonnets (1595) and Frank Zappa & the Mothers of Invention’s doo wap parodies on the album *Cruising with Ruben & the Jets* (1968), two completely different versions of love poetry in two different languages. The disparity between the two types of information hopefully produces comedy as well as music.

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Know Your Place

I met Fred Wah in 1998 at a poetry festival in Portugal where we were both reading. I think the various languages and discourses in my work caught his ear. My work does not sit comfortably in categories, and certainly not linguistic ones: it is probably situated in doorways or “in between.” Fred Wah’s poem “mister in between” from his book *Isadora Blue* ends:

The downburst blows away, the scene
affirmative by the day. Word's out
what I need to do is mess around
with Mister In-Between (13).

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So we started to mess with Mister In-Betweens. I had been thinking for a while about the ways in which institutions seek to constrain and compartmentalize through a slavish reverence of standards, particularly standard language, or in Fred Wah’s terms, the way they loathe Mister In-Between. Doors cannot be left ajar and people certainly cannot hang about on thresholds: boundaries must be drawn. Clear demarcations please in clear sentences. I had visited the boys’ grammar school I attended in Leicester, and acquired a number of panoramic rolled school photographs, although I wasn’t sure how I might use them in my work, until I thought of cutting out paired portraits from the sea of regulated anonymity, and relocating them in the slots of drawer pulls used for filing cabinets, which I then nailed to dark wood panels. The act of destroying the image by pointing to the individual personalities gestures towards a liberation from institutional anonymity,

while the aligned drawer pulls reassert the institution's power to label and control. At the Calgary conference in 2003 to celebrate his and Pauline Butling's work, Fred Wah and I decided to set up a typewriter in the corridor outside the lecture hall, and to ask the participants, including contemporary North American writers such as Erín Moure, Charles Bernstein, Daphne Marlatt, Robert Kroetsch, George Bowering, Roy Miki and Aritha van Herk, to write very short responses on cards of 7 x 4 cm (the size of the slot in the drawer pull) to two texts: William Blake's "And priests in black gowns were walking their rounds,/ And binding with briars my joys and desires" from "The Garden of Love" (127) and Maurice Blanchot's "Nonunifying words which would accept not to be a gateway or bridge (pont), which do not 'pontificate,' words able to cross both sides of the abyss without filling it in and without reuniting the sides (without reference to unity)" (46).

Wah and I wrote a number of these responses, which we inserted into the slots in the drawer pulls, along with images of hand gestures used to teach grammar. Throughout the conference, we removed some of the portraits and replaced them with the anonymous texts we were receiving—a version of the exhibition was, thus, produced at the opening (fig. 30).



Fig. 30. John Havelda and Fred Wah, *Know Your Place 9*, 2003, photographs, paper and aluminium drawer pulls on wood, 50 x 50 cm.

For me, these texts came to disrupt familiar and soporific language—just what does “Neither I know/ him nor does he” mean? “Leave no stone turned” is a clear reversal of a good old familiar idiom, while “O! REVE WAH” is a witty homophonic translation, mining the latent, and in this case surprisingly pertinent, meanings in the most banal expressions—is anything straightforward, does anything “go without saying?”

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Not only is *Know Your Place* in between image and text, but the inclusion of the audience in the production of the piece adds a performative element. Many of the texts were written by people at the conference, and at performances of the boxed translation of the piece, I like to invite a member of the audience to cut the deck and so *write* the text.

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In the catalogue essay produced when *Know Your Place* was exhibited at Imagolucis Fotogaleria in Porto in 2005, the British artist and critic Robert Clark suggests that:

Without these texts, the photo-adorned files would appear to embody grim corridors of circumscribed thinking and creative repression. The poetic texts seem to laterally liberate the implied thoughts of the subjects of the photo-portraits. They are intimations of private reverie: these are some of the disconnected insights and absurdities that may well be taking place behind the facial facades of those apparently perfectly behaved scholars. The anonymity of all these disparate poetic murmurs adds further to the air of furtive disobedience. (n.p.)

The captions, or rectangular thought bubbles are arbitrarily inserted, or rather their location is determined by visual as opposed to semantic criteria. The aleatory relationship between image and text in *Know Your Place*, for me, looks to the work of the The Royal Art Lodge, founded in 1996 by Michael Dumontier, Marcel Dzama, Neil Farber, Drue Langlois, Jonathan Pylypchuk, and Adrian Williams in Winnipeg, and Swiss artists Fischli and Weiss' *Suddenly This Overview*.

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Fig. 31. The Royal Art Lodge, *Talking to the Lord...*, 2007, acrylic on board, 3" x 3."

The captions are hilariously arbitrary (fig. 31). Three possibilities are offered, but once set in motion the text is unstoppable.



Fig. 32. Peter Fischli and David Weiss, *Suddenly this Overview: “Herr and Frau Einstein Shortly after the Conception of Their Son, the Genius Albert,”* 1981, unfired clay.

Without the titles these clay pieces would be empty signifiers (fig. 32). The titles comically point to the limitless possibilities of interpretation. The hermeneutic specificity points to a hermeneutic infinity.

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At the 2003 conference in Calgary, Charles Bernstein read a shuffle text, and said that he had first seen the form used by bpNichol. Given the latter’s importance to so many Canadian poets—Nichol was a friend of Wah’s before his untimely death in 1988—it seemed fitting to me to take the aleatory element of *Know Your Place* and reconfigure it into this literary form, to box up a kind of miniature, performable exhibition (fig. 33).



Fig. 33. John Havelde and Fred Wah. *Know Your Place* (Porto: de Corrida Edições, 2007) 2 cards front and back, each card 7 x 4 cm.

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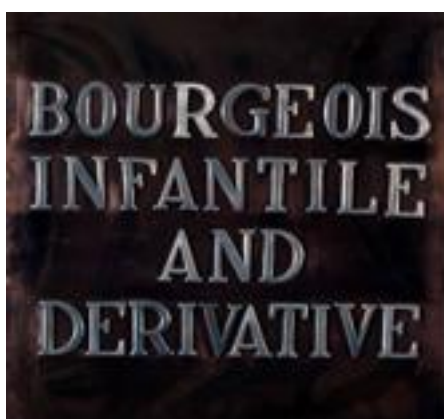


Fig. 34. John Havelde, *Bourgeois, Infantile and Derivative*, 2004, aluminium on copper, 40 x 40 cm.

A critic of some institutional influence in Lisbon once flicked through a portfolio of my work and abruptly declared it to be “bourgeois, infantile and derivative.” After recomposing myself from what felt like a physical assault, I thought the best I could do was to make sure (fig. 34). My work *is* derivative, but that seems to me barely worth stating. Whose isn’t? I think Kenneth Goldsmith, for one, might agree:

Sometimes, I'll think that I've had an original thought or feeling and then, at 2 A.M., while watching an old movie on TV that I hadn't seen for many years, the protagonist will spout something that I had previously claimed as my own. In other words, I took his words (which, of course, weren't really "his words" at all), internalized them, and made them my own. This happens all the time. (83)

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However, bourgeois and infantile? That's another bow-tied tantrum altogether.

Notes

¹ Teofilo Folengo, a Benedictine monk of the 15th century, referred to macronic works as a literary version of the dish made of flour, butter and cheese.

² Two recordings of my sound poems, “The Implosion of the Vulgar Tongue” and “Inbred Headlines” are available at <http://www.aslongasittakes.org/issue4.html>, and my essay “Against Preconditioning: Steve McCaffery’s Sound Poetry” was published in *West Coast Line* (2012).

³ The lyrics of the first verse and chorus are perhaps worth quoting in full:

What's cute about little cutie

It's her beauty, not brains

Old father time will never harm you

If your charm still remains

After you grow old, baby.

Keep young and beautiful

It's your duty to be beautiful

Keep young and beautiful

If you want to be loved.

⁴ “Against love and Fortune, there is no defence.”

⁵ Kenneth Burke in “Terministic Screens” divides language into two categories:

“scientific” (language which states “it is” or “it is not”) and “dramatistic” (language which states “thou shalt” or “thou shalt not,”) in order to argue that all language is necessarily dramatistic, given that any term is necessarily a selection and therefore a deflection of reality.

⁶ Steve McCaffery pointed out the paragrammatic reading of *andonandon*, and of his own very similar piece in *Panopticon*.

⁷ For a detailed discussion of this aspect of dictionaries see Allon White, “The Dismal Sacred Word: Academic Language and the Social Reproduction of Seriousness” (1983).

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